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ABSTRACT

The Annenberg Rural Challenge locates and funds exemplary rural public school programs to serve as models for rural education reform. The guiding theory of the Rural Challenge is that when rural schools base their teaching on the economy, ecology, history, and culture of their communities while fully engaging the community in the school's work, schools and communities improve together. A 4-year evaluation of the effectiveness of the Rural Challenge's reform work concluded that: (1) place-based education increased student appreciation of their histories and communities and increased community participation and resources; (2) participation in community-based work instilled valuable new skills in addition to academic understanding; and (3) learning in the community involved demonstrating student leadership, responding to community needs, and contributing to community well-being, and changed expectations of what it means to attend school. Although standardized test results were not a factor in the evaluation, it was noted that Rural Challenge schools demonstrated above-average performance on traditional benchmarks of test scores, attendance, and graduation rates. Examples are given of student projects based on environmental issues, local history and culture, rural economic development, and technology. (TD)

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ED 441 625

The Rural Challenge

RURAL SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES WORKING AS PARTNERS FOR THE FUTURE OF RURAL AMERICA

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When "systemic reform" is used within The Rural Challenge, it means communities and schools that understanding that both are "growing" and genuinely serving human needs and interests.

The theory that has guided the work of The Rural Challenge is that when rural public schools base their teaching on the economy, ecology, history, and culture of the communities they serve, and fully engage members of the community in the work of the school, schools and communities get better together.

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THE RURAL CHALLENGE VISION

In 1995, former Ambassador Walter Annenberg made an extraordinary pledge of $50 million for work to reform rural American public education. With his pledge came a challenge: to receive the funds, other private donors and public agencies had to match his contribution with funds of their own. The Rural Challenge was created to see that Ambassador Annenberg's generosity was matched, and that the work he funded was worthy of his vision. The fledgling organization had five years to locate and fund exemplary rural public school programs–programs that could serve as models not only for other rural schools, but that had the potential of infusing new meaning in urban educational settings, as well.

The theory that has guided the work of The Rural Challenge is that when rural public schools base their teaching on the economy, ecology, history, and culture of the communities they serve, and fully engage members of the community in the work of the school, schools and communities get better together. Four years later, this theory has proved true–in more than 700 schools in 33 states–where students and community members alike are engaged and excited, working together to solve real-life problems and, in doing so, transforming both rural communities and schools. As it enters its final year of grant-making, evidence is strong that The Rural Challenge has made progress toward its goal of beginning a nationwide rural school reform movement.

To measure the effectiveness of this work, a team of researchers headed by Vito Perrone of the Harvard Graduate School of Education has spent four years documenting Rural Challenge programs that have involved thousands of students, teachers, and community members in projects as diverse as the rural communities they represent. This brochure provides highlights of the research team's findings. A two-volume report, *Living and Learning in Rural Schools and Communities*, provides a more exhaustive discussion of the evaluation project along with extensive examples of student work.

MEASURING SUCCESS IN RURAL CHALLENGE PROGRAMS

In evaluating the effectiveness of the rural school reform work undertaken by The Rural Challenge and its funded partners, the Harvard team looked for answers to the following questions:

- Is the investment making a difference?
- Are communities and schools communicating more–and more effectively?
- Are students being seen increasingly as resources to the community, and becoming more invested in the well-being of the community?
- Are community people assuming larger educating roles, both in and beyond the schools?
- Is more of what students do in school related to the community?
- Is there greater optimism about the community as a place to live and work?
- Are attitudes about being in this place and being from this place growing more positive?

To answer these questions, members of the evaluation team spent up to four weeks during the school year interviewing students, teachers, administrators, and community members at selected sites. They also looked extensively at student work–how well it was connected to the place, its level of complexity, the kinds of expertise (in technology, the arts, citizenship, or science) students were developing, the importance of the students' work to the community, and the extent to which the community was engaged in the school's mission.

The results of traditional standardized tests were not a factor in the evaluation, being seen by the team as "too insensitive, too limited, too constraining," and offering "too little genuine accountability" for student work. Yet by these measures, as well, Rural Challenge students are making the grade. According to the evaluation team's report, "students in...Rural Challenge schools tend to demonstrate, for the most part, above average performance on traditional benchmarks of test scores, attendance and graduation rates."

> Students...in Rural Challenge schools tend to demonstrate, for the most part, above average performance on traditional benchmarks of test scores, attendance, and graduation rates.
>
> – from *Living and Learning in Rural Schools and Communities*

> Work seen as good was understood to be rooted in a place, connections could be made to other learning, there was a voice or person visible, complexity was manifest. It was clear that students were gaining a sense of expertise, higher levels of understanding, and the work mattered to the students and to the community. In these terms, the work we viewed this year was of much higher quality than what we reviewed a year ago.
>
> – from *Living and Learning in Rural Schools and Communities*

EDUCATION ROOTED IN PLACE

Each Rural Challenge program reflects its own unique community. The common thread that weaves these diverse communities together is the belief that the best teaching, learning, and growth occur when education is rooted in a sense of place. Whether the unifying theme is a community's history, its culture, its economy, or its environment—or a combination of these—Rural Challenge programs seek to engage students and community members equally and actively in citizenship, learning, and problem-solving.

This place-based approach to learning not only makes education come alive for students, but also provides important benefits for the communities where they live and learn. The Harvard research team found that "the students who have experienced learning that is focused on place have come to value their histories and communities in much deeper ways." Similarly, "these students are seen by members of the community as valuable resources, genuine citizens, which also changes the way they think about themselves."

> Increasingly in all sites, community members are present more often as resources to various classroom projects, as mentors to particular students, and as collaborators in identifying and communicating school needs.
> – from *Living and Learning in Rural Schools and Communities*

> We can now say that work around place is occurring in virtually every Rural Challenge site, and increasingly those in schools and communities can discuss why attention to place is important. This represents a major advance. What is encouraging in some of these projects is that they go beyond single classrooms and teachers. In this regard, they are moving in the direction of more systemic change.
> – from *Living and Learning in Rural Schools and Communities*

> [Education] that uses the local place as a critical text and laboratory fundamentally changes the perceptions of what is valuable information and what is understood to be real work. – from *Living and Learning in Rural Schools and Communities*

STUDENT WORK

Rural Challenge students–ranging in age from kindergarten through 12th grade–have used their community-based educational experiences to produce an impressive body of work. This includes research reports, internet websites, community newspapers, multimedia presentations, photography exhibits, documentary videotapes, compact disks, quilts and other crafts, nature trails and community gardens, poetry anthologies, short stories, oral histories, art exhibitions, and museum displays, to name a few. Among the many examples include:

- Fourth-grade students in Henderson, Nebraska, who are performing a play and giving PowerPoint presentations to state convention audiences about the history of their town;
- High-school students in Mariposa, California, who are helping to conduct ongoing environmental studies at Yosemite National Park;
- Students in several rural Alabama communities who have given their small towns a voice by writing and publishing community newspapers;

> The activities shared by participants demonstrated powerful representations of skills–what are described in the Rural Challenge sites as emerging standards: those that grow from within rather than those enunciated by states and national organizations. These emerging standards are invariably...becoming higher standards.
>
> – from *Living and Learning in Rural Schools and Communities*

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- High-school students in Weyerhaeuser, Wisconsin, whose business producing solar air-dried lumber is listed in the Wisconsin bluebook of federally approved corporations;
- Students in Edcouch-Elsa, Texas, who produce a journal, with articles in English and Spanish, focusing on historical, cultural, and economic issues relating to this largely Hispanic local community; and
- High-school students in Lotts Creek, Kentucky, who are documenting the history of the school and the community through videotaped interviews with elders and an exhibit of still photographs dating back to the early 1900s.

When students undertake these kinds of projects, they not only gain important academic understanding, but also learn valuable new skills. Many go on to share these skills with other students and with community members. According to the research team, students engaged in project-based work "did not just learn about history, websites, science, and their communities, they became historians, website developers, scientists, and active citizens."

Learning in Rural Challenge programs is not about rote answers to prescribed questions. Learning involves demonstrating student leadership, responding to community needs, making a lasting contribution to a community's well-being, and changing the expectations of what it means to go to school.

The approach is frequently interdisciplinary, and often takes place outside school walls. It almost always involves presenting the finished work to parents, teachers, fellow students, and the community at large.

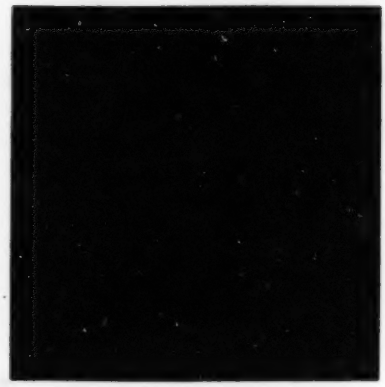
> Students...did not just learn about history, websites, science, and their communities, they became historians, website developers, scientists, and active citizens.
>
> – from *Living and Learning in Rural Schools and Communities*

THE ENVIRONMENT

The air, water, and land that sustain rural communities also have been a focus of study and engagement for many Rural Challenge students. In some cases, environmental issues have proved a catalyst for building bridges between historically different interests, and students have played a key role in bringing community members together to preserve the resources they share. Two examples from among many Rural Challenge environmental projects follow.

- In the Yampa River Valley in northwest Colorado, the 165-mile-long river is a resource shared by four Rural Challenge school districts. As the longest undammed river in the West, the Yampa is also one of the most biologically intact. Yet coal mining, power plants, agriculture, ranching, and tourism all impact the river. Rural Challenge students have brought together valley residents to talk about how to resolve conflicting interests to protect the river that represents the valley's future.

- In Eastport, Maine, students at Shead High School have become researchers documenting the health of the marine resources of this deep-water port, part of the Fundy Bay ecosystem. The students regularly monitor water for red tides and other pathogens, and evaluate the condition of the local mudflats and clam beds. Their research—presented in the form of computer-generated maps—has provided a valuable resource to local clammers, and has filled a gap in the state environmental monitoring system, which could not collect this information because of budget cutbacks.



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LOCAL HISTORY AND CULTURE

For many Rural Challenge schools, the path to understanding the importance of place has been to examine the historical events that have shaped the culture and the community. Often, the students' historical research has led to the rediscovery of little-known characters or events–people and occurrences that have helped make these rural communities what they are today. In many cases, these discoveries have been translated into public performances and presentations that help members of the community reconnect with their past, with the students, and with one another. In other cases, the simple act of collecting oral histories from community "elders" has given a new sense of value and validity to people and their stories–and to the rural places that have shaped them.

For other schools, it is the traditional crafts, music, dance, and folklore of their communities that brings education to life. Whether it is in the traditional language and "way of living" of the Yup'ik in Alaska, the herbal lore and quilting of rural Appalachia, or the native art and dances of the 19 Pueblos represented by the Santa Fe Indian School, local cultures are honored–and form the basis of study–in many Rural Challenge schools.

The following are a few examples of the many Rural Challenge projects that use local history and culture as the centerpiece of place-based education.

- In Idalia, on the eastern plains of Colorado, elementary and middle school students have produced a display called "Picture Old Idalia." What began as a collection of old photographs is now a permanent exhibit that is bringing community people into the school to share their knowledge of the people and places depicted in the photos. More than 1,000 photos collected by the Idalia students include pictures of the area's original homesteaders.
- In Mendocino, California, students' curiosity about Chinese immigrants to the area 100 years earlier led to extensive historical research. By exploring photographs, maps, and historical accounts from journals and newspapers and conducting oral histories and historical interviews, students developed a new appreciation of the Chinese contribution to the history and culture of their town. Community presentations of their work, which included a documentary video, resulted in a $5,000 donation from the National Trust for Historic Preservation to help restore and preserve a Mendocino Chinese landmark, the Kwan Tai Temple.
- In eastern Kentucky, students at Stanton Elementary School have immersed themselves in the bluegrass music traditions for which the area is known. One out of four students gets individual lessons on some kind of bluegrass instrument–fiddle, banjo, bass–from a member of the community. The school's musical performance group, the Wise Village Pickers and Singers, includes students aged five through twelve, and has performed at the International Bluegrass Music Association Awards show.

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BUILDING RURAL ECONOMIES

One of the major goals of The Rural Challenge's work has been to use place-based learning as a catalyst to help revitalize rural communities that have been hard-hit by the loss of traditional resource-based economies and the migration of many rural residents to city-based job opportunities. Many of the programs funded by The Rural Challenge have addressed rural economic issues through student efforts to develop new economic opportunities in their communities. Some notable examples follow.

- In Rutland, South Dakota, a tiny town of only 29 people got the one thing it really wanted—a convenience store—while an enterprising group of Rural Challenge high school students learned math, management, and other skills by running their own business. Students in Rutland polled the town's residents about what the town needed to make it a better place to live. They found out that a convenience store was something everyone wanted. Armed with that information, the students established and now run a convenience store that also sells gasoline and serves as a community meeting place. The students make all business decisions; adults are involved only as non-voting advisors.

- In Lubec, Maine, Rural Challenge high school students in this remote rural fishing community are revitalizing their town's economy and preserving its rich maritime history through an aquaculture project. Lubec, population 2,000, is the most easterly town in the U.S. It also is beset by chronic poverty: in 1990, the average per capita income was $8,700. Things are not much better in 1999. Through The Aquaculture Project, nearly one-third of the high school's students are learning by doing—and contributing to the community by raising and marketing salmon, sea urchins, baitfish, and rainbow trout. In an extraordinary act, this hard-strapped town voted $15,000 to establish a permanent center for the project, which began its life in a large closet in 1995. Bob Peacock, a Lubec High School graduate who operates Peacock Canning, a company founded by his great-grandfather in 1928, says: "Without the aquaculture industry, my great-grandfather's factory would be idle."

- In Pollock, South Dakota, students identified a need in their community for more housing. The high school's agriculture and shop classes are working together through The Rural Challenge to renovate old mobile homes, and then rent them or sell them back to the community. Other student-run businesses in Pollock include a video editing business, a T-shirt monogram service, and a student-run cheese store that sells cheese produced by a local factory. The factory had closed its retail store; thanks to the students, the locally produced cheese is once again available directly to the community.

- Through REAL (Rural Entrepreneurship Through Action Learning), a Rural Challenge partner program in Hillsborough, North Carolina, high school student Brian Blalock spent a full year as an apprentice to a local welder. As part of his classroom work with REAL, he developed a business plan and used part of his school time to build a trailer to make his welding shop portable and mobile. With help from a $1,000 REAL scholarship, he started his own business, developed some steady customers, and is on his way to stepping into the shoes of the town's only welder, who is retiring.

TECHNOLOGY

The rapidly changing world of computer technology enhances much Rural Challenge work. According to the Harvard research team, "access to knowledge and equipment that the school can make available is a valued resource to rural community people and, as a result, libraries, gyms, and computer centers across Rural Challenge communities are increasingly attracting community people into the school sphere." Examples of student work around technology abound.

- Kendrick Kidd, a tenth grade Rural Challenge student at Packers Bend in Alabama, organized and directed the wiring of the school for computer networking. His work, which now involves many other students, resulted in Packers Bend being the first high school in the state that designed, built, and now manages its own computer network.

- Students in the applied economics course at Clear Lake High School in South Dakota have designed and developed web pages for "client" businesses and agencies in their community. They also are developing a community database that includes information on economic opportunities, housing and land costs, events, education, recreation, news, weather, sports, and local history.

- At St. Paul High School in Virginia, student-designed websites are available for most courses. Student Matt Pritchard, along with a student web staff, trained teachers and large numbers of students to develop the sites. This work has led to a request for Matt to develop St. Paul's town website. Neighboring schools also are asking for assistance from the St. Paul web staff to set up their own courses on the web.

> Across the country we have been told consistently that students are the local experts when it comes to technology. They teach adults how to get access to the internet and how to become more proficient computer users. Through these exchanges adults begin to see their young people as valuable community resources, which sets the flow of interaction between community and school going in two directions. Community members feel welcomed and find a role for themselves in their local school, and at the same time students extend their work and interests beyond the traditional school context well into the community. – from *Living and Learning in Rural Schools and Communities*

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NATIONAL PROJECTS

Bread Loaf School of English
Middlebury College
Middlebury, VT 05755
(802) 445-5418

Foxfire
The Foxfire Fund
P.O. Box 541
Mountain City, GA 30562-0541
(706) 746-5828

National Writing Project
School of Education
5511 Tolman Hall, #1670
Berkeley, CA 94720-1670
(510) 642-0963

Rural Entrepreneurship Through Action Learning Enterprises (REAL)
115 Market St., Suite 320
Durham, NC 27701
(919) 688-7325

ALABAMA

Coalition of Alabamians Reforming Education (CARE)
P.O. Box 2516
Selma, AL 36702
(334) 872-7280

PACERS (Program for the Academic and Cultural Enhancement of Rural Schools)
Program for Rural Services and Research
205 University Blvd., East
Box 870372
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0372
(205) 348-6432

Southern Initiative of the Algebra Project
(see Mississippi listing)

ALASKA

Alaska Rural Challenge/ Rural Systemic Initiative
Alaska Federation of Natives Inc.
1577 C Street, Suite 300
Anchorage, AK 99501
(907) 274-3611

ARIZONA

Learn In Beauty
Navajo Nation
Division of Dine Education
P.O. Box 4575
Window Rock, AZ 86515
(520) 871-7790

CALIFORNIA

Mariposa County Rural Challenge
Mariposa County Unified School District
P.O. Box 8
Mariposa, CA 95338
(209) 742-0250

North Coast Rural Challenge Network
Mendocino Unified School District
P.O. Box 1154
Mendocino, CA 95460
(707) 937-5868

Ventura County
Ojai Unified School District
414 East Ojai Avenue
Ojai, CA 93023
(805) 640-4300

Yuba Watershed Alliance
P.O. Box 185
Camptonville, CA 95922
(530) 288-3451

COLORADO

Colorado Rural Charter Schools Network
P.O. Box 420
37888 U.S. Highway 24
Lake George, CO 80827
(719) 748-3911

Stewards of the High Plains
Idalia School
P.O. Box 40
Idalia, CO 80755
(970) 354-7298

Yampa Valley Legacy Education Initiative
P.O. Box 774368
Steamboat Springs, CO 80477
(970) 879-4296

GEORGIA

League of Professional Schools
Program for School Improvement
124 Algerhold Hall
University of Georgia
Athens, GA 30602-7108
(706) 542-2516

Tenn-Ga-Lina
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IDAHO

Communities Creating Connections
P.O. Box 356
Elk City, ID 83525
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IOWA

Akron Westfield Community Schools
650 Kerr Drive, Box 950
Akron, IA 51001
(712) 568-2020

KANSAS

Matfield Green Consortium for Place-Based Education
The Land Institute
2440 East Water Well Road
Salina, KS 67401
(785) 823-5376

KENTUCKY

Appalachian Rural Education Netwo
Appalachian Center,
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624 Maxwelton Court
Lexington, KY 40506
(606) 257-4852

MAINE

Partnership Rural Initiative in Maine
301C Bailey Hall
Gorham, ME 04038
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MINNESOTA

Center for School Change
University of Minnesota
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301 19th Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55455-0429
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MISSISSIPPI
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P.O. Box 13917
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NEBRASKA
School at the Center
Center for Curriculum
and Instruction
119 Henzlik Hall
P.O. Box 880355
Lincoln, NE 68588
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NEW MEXICO
Circles of Wisdom
Santa Fe Indian School
1502 Cerrillos Road, Box 5340
Santa Fe, NM 87550
(505) 989-6340

NORTH CAROLINA
Project Albemarle Learning Center (Project ALC)
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Shawboro, NC 27973
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Southern Initiative of the Algebra Project
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Tenn-Ga-Lina
220 Brookstone Lane
Murphy, NC 28906
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OREGON
Tillamook County Education Consortium
Tillamook School District
2405 Fifth Street
Tillamook, OR 97141
(503) 842-1214

PENNSYLVANIA
Warren County Selborne Project
c/o Roger Tory Peterson
Institute of Natural History
311 Curtis Street
Jamestown, NY 14701-9620
(716) 665-2473

SOUTH CAROLINA
Southern Initiative of the Algebra Project
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SOUTH DAKOTA
Program for Rural School and Community Renewal
College of Education
and Counseling
South Dakota State University
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P.O. Box 303
1119 Knoxville Highway
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TEXAS
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P.O. Box 127
Edcouch, TX 78558
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Schleicher County
Schleicher County Independent
School District
P.O. Box W
Eldorado, TX 76936
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VERMONT
Vermont Rural Partnership
120 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05620
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WEST VIRGINIA
West Virginia Stewardship Collaborative
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Moyers, WV 26815
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New Paradigm Partners Rural Challenge Project
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Tony, WI 54563
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Hollandale, WI 53544
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The Rural Challenge is America's only private, nonprofit foundation dedicated solely to strengthening both rural public schools and the communities they serve. Through grants to rural elementary and secondary school programs, advocacy work, policy research, and publications, The Rural Challenge supports education that deeply involves students in the history, culture, economy, and ecology of their own rural communities, and that engages these communities as full partners in the work of the schools. Founded in 1995, The Rural Challenge began with a $50 million pledge from former Ambassador Walter Annenberg to support rural school reform efforts. Today, The Rural Challenge supports place-based education programs in more than 700 rural elementary and secondary schools in 33 states.

The Rural Challenge is governed by a national volunteer Board of Trustees and led by a chair elected from its members. The Board is responsible for setting policy for the organization and securing the resources necessary to advance the organization's mission.

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